

- Stress / Eating customs

## Are you an emotional eater?

### Finding ways to cope with stress without turning to food

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Do you find yourself turning to food for comfort even when you're not hungry? Do you grab a chocolate bar or a can of soda after being yelled at by your boss? Do you reward yourself with cheesy pizza or burger and fries after a grueling day at the office? Do you munch on a bag of popcorn or chips when you're home alone on a Friday night feeling lonely? Do you often order from delivery apps out of boredom? Milk tea, anyone?

You need not be hungry in order to eat when you're an emotional eater. All it takes is an emotional trigger. Loneliness, boredom, frustration, anger, hurt, insecurities, fear, anxiety, stress, depression—any negative feeling that compels you to eat.

When you're an emotional eater, food is your best friend. It's there when you need it at your most vulnerable state and it does not talk back or criticize. It makes you feel better, albeit temporarily. Food, however, does not and will never be able to solve your problems. In fact, it will hurt you in too many ways.

Studies have shown that emotional eating is more common among women with depressive symptoms than men. Higher emotional eating was associated with higher consumption of energy-dense snacks, high in calories even in small portions, specifically sweet and fatty food. This was concluded by Geraldine M Camilleri and colleagues in their observational study and research "The Associations between Emotional Eating and Consumption of Energy-Dense Snack Foods Are Modified by Sex and Depressive Symptomatology," published in May 21, 2014.

Women can attest that a bar of chocolate can indeed give you a huge dose of much needed happy hormones, especially on days we get a visit from Aunt Flow. It is a fact that sugar and chocolate signal the brain to produce dopamine. This is a neurotransmitter or brain chemical and a type of happy hormone. That burst of energy and high is fleeting. It will cause your mood to crash in no time, thus making you feel worse. It will also wreak havoc with your weight and overall health, especially once it becomes a cycle.

How can you stop emotional eating? Before you can successfully turn to non-food strategies when coping with stress and anxiety, it is important to be self-aware. Know your triggers and track your feelings. This is the first step in taking control of your behavior. It is best to keep a journal, digital or otherwise. You need to record your feelings, situations, and the consequences.

Simply put, identify the emotional or situational triggers, what you ate and how much you consumed, then assess how you felt and what you did after consuming the food. Keeping a journal of your emotions and situations will help you avoid triggers or, at the very least, respond to unavoidable negative emotions and situations in a positive manner that is not food-related.

The next step after identifying triggers is to cope without food by turning to positively distracting and pleasurable nonfood activities. This would include one or a combination of relaxation techniques, stress management, cognitive or mindful mental activities, exercise, and social activities.

If you get the urge to grab a pastry when you need to let off some steam, try to pace around your room while playing classical music or some praise songs. Better yet, take a walk outside if you're in a safe environment. I guarantee you that you will come home feeling lighter not only emotionally but physically as well since you did not add empty calories to your intake that day.

If you are anxious and you feel like you're losing control if you can't have your sweet treat, pause for a moment, close your eyes, and take deep breaths until you feel your heart rate slowing down. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your nose or mouth. You will experience that delaying gratification will go a long way. That wave of

emotion and strong desire to eat, which comes like a tsunami, will eventually diminish. All you need to do is not to act on the strong urge the moment it attacks you.

There are other ways to distract you from giving in to emotional eating. You can take a cold shower, write your thoughts, use a stress ball, hug a pillow, listen to music, get sun exposure, call a friend, aromatherapy, get a massage, create art, get sun exposure, think about things you're grateful for, and, most important, pray. Even when you do not know what to pray for, you can call on God and just cry your heart out. No words are needed as He knows our innermost thoughts.

Perhaps you're exhausted from fighting the cycle of emotional eating. If you need help, do not hesitate to seek professional help from a registered nutritionist dietitian specializing on nutritional psychology or integrative and functional nutrition, a psychologist or a physician specializing on mental health. There is a way out of this vicious cycle of emotional eating.

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